



King's Research Portal

DOI:

[10.1080/19392397.2011.574866](https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2011.574866)

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Howells, R. (2011). Celebrities, Saints and Sinners: The Photograph as Holy Relic. *Celebrity Studies*, 2(2), 112-130. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2011.574866>

Citing this paper

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact librarypure@kcl.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Celebrities, Saints and Sinners: The Photograph as Holy Relic

Dr Richard Howells

Reader in Cultural and Creative Industries

Email richard.howells@kcl.ac.uk

Tel +44 (0)20 7848 1357

Culture, Media and Creative Industries

King's College London

3Ca Chesham Building

Strand Campus

London

WC2R 2LS

This pre-print paper is copyright of the author, but it is free to be used for research purposes as long as it is properly attributed. Permissions for multiple reproductions should be addressed to the author. This paper is intended to circulate work that readers might not otherwise be able to access. If your institution does subscribe to the journal, please access it via that link.

Please cite as Richard Howells, "Celebrities, Saints and Sinners: The Photograph as Holy Relic" in *Celebrity Studies*, Volume 2, No 2, July 2011, pp. 112-130.

IMPORTANT: When referring to this paper, please check the page numbers in the journal published version and cite these

Heroes, saints and celebrities: the photograph as holy relic¹

Richard Howells Culture, Media and Creative Industries (CMCI) School of Arts and Humanities, King's College London, Strand, London, UK

We are today surrounded not only by celebrities but, more importantly, their images. Yet even in this famously multi-media world, it is the photograph that remains especially equipped for celebrity imaging. This paper seeks to explain both the ubiquity and the appeal of the celebrity photograph. It pays particular attention to the idea of 'presence' in the celebrity image and ultimately argues that the photograph can be equated to a holy relic, especially the 'representative' classification of relics still recognised within organised religion today. It will be demonstrated that in both celebrity photograph and representative relic, the celebrity/saint, is both mortally absent yet curiously present.

The paper begins by making trans-historical connections between images from the Classical, Byzantine, Medieval and contemporary periods, demonstrating the succession from hero to saint to celebrity. But it also explores conceptual issues of iconoclasm and ontology, finally uniting these historical and theoretical connections in the celebrity photography of the present day. It seeks, therefore, not primarily to uncover 'new facts' about the periods and practises discussed, but rather to elucidate Fred Inglis argues in *A Short History of Celebrity*, we need to understand: 'just how historical is the contemporary.' (2010, p. 217). This is precisely what this paper seeks

to achieve: While celebrity is often perceived as a contemporary phenomenon, its antecedents firmly locate it within history.

Connecting themes include veneration through cult, premature death, perpetual youth and eternal life. Thus, this study of the celebrity photograph will help us to reflect not only on the nature of the medium, but also the increasingly religious nature of celebrity in the seemingly secular world today. Our understanding of the celebrity photograph must therefore be both ontologically grounded and historically linked. Ultimately, our investigation of the celebrity photograph will contribute to our understanding of celebrity itself.

Keywords: photography; celebrity; relic; ontology; icon; cult

The media of celebrity culture have a long and varied history. Emperors, kings and generals have seen their images transmitted via coins, busts and statuary, even buildings and triumphal arches. Portrait painting, of course, flourished in the last millennium, while the development of print technology powered the reprographic potential of media such as engraving. This further enabled popular dissemination of the celebrity image which, as mass production became more possible, spread through media as diverse (for example) as the Staffordshire portrait figures of the 18th and 19th centuries. Here, royalty, statesmen, military and religious leaders, entertainers, sportsmen, artists, authors and even criminals were represented and collected in pottery form (Pugh, 1970).² A music hall song of the era ('sung, with enthusiastic applause by Madame Vestris') begins: 'Will you buy Images? I images cry/Very fine very pretty, very cheap will you buy?' (Pugh, 1970, pp. x-xi)

The word 'image' has a double –but connected– meaning within the context of celebrity studies. In its simplest sense, it refers to a visual representation of someone, such as in the music hall 'Will you buy images' song cited above. Today they are more likely to be photographs (although this paper will proceed to include other visual forms as part of the historical discussion). On the other hand, 'image' in the celebrity context can also refer to a far broader, public persona which can be cultivated in numerous ways in addition to straightforward visual representation. What Richard Dyer (1979, 2003, Dyer and McDonald, 2008) said of stars is equally true of celebrities: they are as much image as actuality, and this has always been the case with people whose reputation eclipses their physical presence, whatever their era or domain. As Chris Rojek has observed, the absence of direct, personal contact is one of the hallmarks of celebrity culture. Indeed, such distance is 'the precondition of both celebrity and notoriety.' (Rojek 2001, p.12) What we are left with is the 'illusion of intimacy' and that illusion is effectively facilitated by the mass media (2001, p. 19). This process is necessary because: 'the relationship is at bottom imaginary. The overwhelming majority of celebrities and fans do not actually know each other or engage in face-to-face interaction.' (2001, p. 65) The image, therefore, is doubly important. The photographic image today is an important component of the broader celebrity image. As Holmes and Redmond (Holmes and Redmond, 2010 p. 5) have noted: 'celebrity is profoundly multi-media and multi-textual', but it is argued here that the photograph particularly ably facilitates the illusion of intimacy with people visual image and especially the celebrity photograph. An understanding of the photograph, it is contended, is necessary to the understanding of celebrity today.

Despite its preponderance in the mass and modern media, it is important to remember

st th

that celebrity is not a 21st or even 20th century phenomenon (Holmes, 2008, Holmes and Redmond, 2006).³ Inglis argues that celebrity 'if not under that name' has been with us for 250 years (2010, p. 47). This investigation, however, will go back considerably further.

Nevertheless, it is the modern, mass media which, as Rojek (2001, pp. 13 and 16) states, have provided the vital ingredient in the formation of modern celebrity culture. It is the agent which so effectively connects the celebrity with 'the common man.' (2001, p. 28) Clearly, photography is crucial to this, and as Rojek shows, this medium: 'furnished celebrity culture with powerful new ways of staging and extending celebrity.' (2001, p. 128) I propose, however, to go further by showing that photography, in addition to its mechanical effectiveness, is ontologically ideal for the task. It is an ontology which roots our understanding of both the medium and the phenomenon still further in the cultural past, yet at the same time helps elucidate the present. As Inglis (2010, p. 217) declares, the celebrity manifestations of today 'were all shaped and prepared for in the close and distant past.'⁴

For many years the photograph (and especially the celebrity photograph) was overlooked in mainstream museum and art gallery life, together with its attendant scholarly appraisal.

Landmarks of change, however, include the 'Art of Photography Photographed' exhibition at the London National Portrait Gallery in 2005, which was mounted in tandem with a ten-part BBC Television series of the same name.⁵ The NPG exhibition, however, reached beyond purely current notions of celebrity by stretching back to the Victorian era beginning, appropriately enough, with Queen Victoria herself. Continuing toward the present, they also showed

photographs of nine other famous people: Mahatma Ghandi, Adolf Hitler, Greta Garbo, John F. Kennedy, Marilyn Monroe, Audrey Hepburn, James Dean, Elvis Presley and Muhammad Ali – the only featured celebrity who was still alive. The exhibition focused, therefore, not on the vast number of ‘celebrities’ (of what ever variety and calibre) who have been photographed over time, but on the far smaller number of celebrities who have been photographed more than any other, hence: ‘The World’s Most Photographed’. This prompts us to pose the entirely apposite question: Why are the world’s most photographed people photographed so much? Put another way: Why do we have so many pictures of the same relatively few people? We already know what these celebrities look like. Some of these photographs aren’t necessarily very ‘good’ in aesthetic terms, but they are powerful primarily because they are photographic images of who they are. On the one hand, then, these kinds of photograph confirm the ‘reality’ of both the image and the imaged, but on the other, the lack of aesthetic quality at the same time demonstrates that the essence of the person depicted can somehow transcend the constraints of a particular photograph. That gives them an almost mystical (Barthes might have said ‘mythical’) quality (Barthes, 2009). In search of that mystery, then, we will proceed via ancient Greece, Byzantium and Christian Rome, drawing parallels between classical statuary, orthodox icons and surprisingly familiar light.

Greece, the *Kouros*, and the Classical Hero

The hero was an important concept throughout Greek culture and can be traced back to the archaic period. The hero was a real, mortal person (typically a soldier or an athlete; usually male) who was worshipped in narrative, in media and in cult (Nagy, 1999). Gregory Nagy (1999, p. 115) argues that the practice of hero cult has its origin in ancestor worship in the 8th century BC. The more he was lauded, of course, the more the hero's fame became mythical rather than simply historical. (1999, p. 10)⁶ But it is important to remember that initially at least, the Greek heroes were ordinary mortals --although they may have had extraordinary talents. But the fact remains that the Greek hero was not a god, for gods had always been immortal. Unlike gods, the hero had to die first in order to gain immortality (Nagy, 1999, p. 174). Death, therefore, was fundamental to the Greek hero. Indeed, an early death was even better. As Nagy puts it (1999, p. 9): 'The hero's death is the theme that gives him his power.' It followed, then, that hero worship required cult practices that were very different to the worship of the gods (1999, p. 115).

It is important to remember that although dead, the Greek hero was not completely dead in the traditional, 21st century western European sense. As Nagy (1999, p. 174) explains: Upon having their lifespan cut short by death, heroes received as consolation the promise of immortality, but this state of immortality after death is located at the extremes of our universe, far removed from the realities of here-and-now.

1999, p. 174) This is, at first glance, a curious concept for us today –but if we consider the equally curious position of saints and celebrities in our own culture, the idea of premature death leading to a kind of immortal life, venerated though cult, is not entirely unthinkable –a point to which we shall return later.

In ancient Greece, however, although the hero may be dead, he was still capable of pleasure, including feasting and good company. His bones, too, were there to be venerated, so the grave site was an important focus for cult practice (Nagy, 1999, p. 174). Greek tombs, says Nigel Spivey (1996, p. 120), were places of worship: ‘places where a fellowship (*koinonia*) was established and maintained between the living and the dead.’ Readers today may be put in mind, for example, of the grave of Doors singer Jim Morrison in the Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris, a site of continuing fellowship and veneration by his fans.⁷

In addition to veneration via poetry, epic and at the grave, the concept of the Greek hero can be approached through visual culture. And while Gregory Nagy has helped explain the hero cult via oral and literary traditions, scholars such as Spivey have added to our understanding through a study of Greek sculpture and its associated practices.

Indeed, many of the themes explored by Nagy through literature are echoed by Spivey by way of the visual arts. According to Spivey (1996, p. 105), Greek sculpture, like Greek literature and religion is ‘permeated by heroes and hero-worship.’ The hero, ‘loves life’ and is often ‘larger than life’, even though he is ‘bound to die, and often blessing as he thus becomes ‘glorified and immortal (*athanatos*).’ (1996, p. 107) As Solon puts it in Heroditus I.131, it is all: ‘a heaven sent proof of how much better it is to be dead than alive.’ (cited in Spivey, 1996, p. 108)

Of course, a hero is not a god. The hero is frequently, and often tragically, flawed, and outright 'antagonism between hero and god' is a recurring feature of in myth. This, in turn, according to Nagy (1999, p. 121), leads to a 'symbiosis between hero and god in cult.' This antagonism between heroes and the gods, of course is not limited to ancient Greece, which is why many of the most beautiful and most photographed people of more recent times (for example Kate Moss, Amy Winehouse, Tiger Woods or the late George Best) are remembered for their flaws as well as their virtues. David Beckham, famously, was considered a flawed beauty with his petulant foul and sending off in the soccer World Cup in 1998, but his relationship with the gods is no longer antagonistic and the older, wiser Beckham is now an established resident on the sporting Olympus and much favoured by the gods of public opinion (Cashmore, 2004).

An important and extremely relevant aspect of Greek hero worship is the *kouros*, which at its most basic level is simply a statue of a naked young man. In cult practice, however, its function is anthropomorphic: It is well known that in Greek mythology, the gods can take the form of men and yet remain divine, and the best human bodies are vehicles for that godly presence (Spivey, 1996, pp. 43-44). Crucially, this anthropomorphic belief extends to statues, for as Spivey (1996, p. 48) states: 'statues in cult contexts were more than representations: they could act and respond. They the person represented –a feature we shall come to recognize again in the ontology of the photographic image. The *kouros* –which we remember is a statue of a *young* man–could be used as a grave marker and thus: 'represent a man who died in old age as being in the physical splendour of his youth.' (Spivey, 1996, p. 117) So, in addition to cult practice investing the mortal hero with perpetual life, it also invests him with perpetual youth. No matter how old and dysfunctional he becomes, the *kouros* preserves him forever in his prime. It is a function similarly performed by the photograph. We hear a distinct classical echo, then, in Robin Muir's assessment of Flip Shulke's *Life* magazine photographs of Muhammad Ali training underwater in 1961. Ali

in these pictures looks like ‘A Hellenic statue salvaged from beneath the Aegean.’ (Muir, 2005, p. 122)⁸ And as Spivey (1996, p. 122) says of the *kouros*: the sculptural contribution to this heroic and heroizing culture is highly important. It sets the physical tone for the practice of emulation and aspiration.⁹

This remains true of similar images of sportsmen today: Compare for example the many photographs of (say) David Beckham's naked torso with the Greek *kouroi* of classical period. The form may be different (and separated by millennia), but the functions are strikingly similar (figure 1).

We will now proceed from ancient Greece to the Byzantine era, and see many of the themes we noted with the hero and the *kouros* re-articulated with the saint and the icon.

Byzantium, Icons and Iconoclasm

heroes of the Byzantine world were saints rather than athletes or soldiers. As Henry

Maguire (1996, p. 3) has it:

The Byzantines surrounded themselves with their saints, invisible but constant companions, whose bodies were made visible by dreams, by visions, and by art. For the Byzantines, it was the image, whether in icons or in visions, that made the unseen world real, and the unseen world that gave real presence to the image.¹⁰

While the Greek had heroes and *kouroi*, the Byzantines communed with their saints through the icon. For the Byzantines the icon was much more than just a representation of a saint or a holy person: At its most simple level, it was an aid to prayer and a focus for meditation. Some people proceeded to believe that the icon could work as a conduit of communication between them and the person it depicted. Finally, others went so far as to use the icon as an object of veneration *in itself* – but it was a thin and controversial line, was it not, between veneration and *worship* of the image? In this way, icons may have been beautiful, but their function was much more than decorative. In the Byzantine church they were ‘theology in visible form’.¹¹ Holy texts may be read aloud on appointed days by the clergy, but icons were there all year round for everyone to see, communicating the Christian message in visual short-hand (Maguire 1996, p. 195). For Patricia Crone (1980, p. 64), they were ‘visual aids for the illiterate.’

The icon was not only powerful but prevalent. The Byzantine church had a great number of saints and holy personages, so there was a need for a great number of icons. More than that, there were variations in the way that many of the same, familiar, recurring saints were repeatedly portrayed; Saint George for example, could Saint George (figure 2).¹²

According to Henry Maguire in *The Icons of Their Bodies* (1996, p. 196), there was a two-way relationship and a continuous dialogue between the image and the viewer. This dialogue created a need not only for images but for varied images of the saints portrayed. If it was only a monologue as opposed to a dialogue, there would have been no point in the artist varying the images. But the images were deliberately varied in order to: '*provoke* different responses from the viewer.'¹³ So, although everyone already knew (for example) what St George looked like, there was still a need for many different portrayals of him, so that each could provoke a different, 'interactive' response from the viewer. This circle of need and provocation led to a multiplicity of images of the same few saints. St George (to echo the title of the NPG 'The World's Most Photographed' exhibition) was one of 'The World's Most Painted', and this example may help us understand the need for so many different photographs of the same (relatively few) celebrities today.

Even in the Byzantine era, icons and their uses proved extremely controversial. This arose from their perceived 'magic' –and especially the idea that the icon could work 'autonomously.'

(Maguire, 1996, pp. 3-4) The image, of course, was at very least an aid to prayer, but more-so it became involved in what Maguire (1996, p. 196) describes as a complex 'matrix of beliefs and practices.' The Byzantine icon worked (or was believed to have worked) through a complicated system of mediation and intercession (Maguire, 1996 p. 93), at the far end of which the believer gained direct 'access to the supernatural through images.' (Maguire 1996, p. 100) Indeed, image operated directly, on their own, not by intercession.' (Maguire, 1996, p. 138) At its most extreme form, the physical substance of the icon was believed to have magical, medicinal powers: At the Second Council of Nicaea in 787, for example, the case was raised of a woman who was cured of a disease by scraping plaster from frescoed images of saints, mixing the powder with water and drinking it.' (Maguire, 1996, p. 138) Centuries later, we can see a surviving example of similar practices at places such as the Monastery of Our Lady Pantanassa

at Mystras, near modern day Sparta. Here, the eyes of many of the saints painted in the plaster have been scraped away. What seems at first like an act of vandalism (or indeed iconoclasm) was, in fact, a curious act of devotion, committed in the belief that the eyes of the saints would act magically for those that possessed them –no matter how vicariously. What was to us mere pigment and plaster was, to the believer, effectively the eyes of a saint.

As we can perhaps imagine, the established church did not welcome such beliefs and practices. There were two main reasons for this. The first is scriptural, and comes from that section of Exodus commonly known as the Ten Commandments. Here, God makes it perfectly clear that one should not make ‘any graven image, or likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth’; and one should not bow down to them or serve them. Should one do this, punishment would follow ‘unto the third and fourth generation.’ Although interpretation varied, there was no doubt that the second commandment was interpreted by some as a clear proscription against religious icons during highly contested episodes of the Byzantine era.

intercession. During the iconoclastic controversies of the eighth and ninth centuries, the Byzantine church found it needed to wrest more control over what Maguire (1996, p. 100) calls: 'access to the supernatural through images.' Image worshippers had come to believe that icons had powers in themselves and that they 'operated directly, on their own, not by intercession.' (Maguire, 1996, p. 138) The church, on the other hand, took the view that access was and should remain indirect through its own intermediaries. In this way, icons should only facilitate access to the saints in the hope that they, in turn, would intercede with the 'supreme judge.' (Maguire, 1996, p. 138) It was the saint, and not the icon, that had the power to act.

Famously, the dispute came to a head with the Iconoclastic Council of 754, in which the church imposed its position and effectively banned icons. (Maguire, 1996, p. 140) Some physical destruction of icons followed and at its most extreme, says Crone (1980, p. 63), this accelerated into: 'a spectacular attack on images, saints, relics, intercessors and whatever other channels of grace that appeared beside the ecclesiastical sacraments'. In 843, however, the use of icons was officially restored; an event now celebrated annually on the first Sunday in Lent with the Feast of Orthodoxy. Byzantine iconoclasm was, therefore, ultimately 'a failure' because as John of Damascus had said, for the Byzantines 'the cult of images' was 'part of their faith.' (Crone, 1980, p. 80)

Representation and Presence in the Image

day, we should pause to reflect more deeply upon some of the conceptual issues now raised, for the case of icons and iconoclasm serves to underline the crucial, enduring and contested status of the visual image. More than that, we have seen that the controversial power of the Byzantine icon was founded on the belief that the person depicted is somehow present in that depiction, and this recurring concept of 'presence' provides another vital stepping stone towards understanding the power of the photographic image today.

It would be a mistake to believe that concerns about the image, idolatry and presence are limited to the primitive or distant past. The Amish people, who continue to thrive in the mid-western United States, still maintain a prohibition on taking or posing for photographs, basing their objections on the same section of the Ten Commandments that was so hotly disputed by during the iconoclastic schisms of the Byzantine era (Hostetler, 1993, p. 319).

The Amish, it might be argued, are a small and special case but the far larger and contemporary Islamic tradition similarly disapproves –to varying degrees–of representational art. This became acutely recognized in September 2005 when the Danish newspaper the *Jyllands-Posten* published a series of satirical cartoons representing the prophet Muhammad himself. As violent controversy spread around the world, it became clear that much of the outrage was not simply in response to criticism of Islam, but also because the convention of never creating any physical image of the prophet had been seemingly violated. Just as with the two other major interpretation.

According to Alain Besançon in *The Forbidden Image* (2000, p. 77), the Torah makes: ‘multiple and explicit prohibitions against figuration. The Koran, in contrast, is almost mute on the subject.’ While there are possible grounds for prohibition in Suras 5:90 and 59:24, he says that these serve to support only ‘the strictest of iconophobes’. There are however some ancient texts outside the Koran that do explicitly ban images. They do not have the authority of the Koran, but according to one hadith: ‘The angels will not enter a home where there is an image.’ (Besançon, 2000, pp. 78-79)¹⁴ History, says Besançon, has not been consistent in the matter of representation in Islam. However, he argues that Islamic attitudes towards the image are best understood theologically rather than simply scripturally: ‘For Islam, it is God’s insurmountable distance that renders impossible the fabrication of an image worthy of its object’. (Besançon, 2000, p. p. 2) After all, it is believed, God is already present in everything already: ‘Every graphic sign, every work of art, refers to God, looks in his direction, yet never hopes to attain him.’ (Besançon, 2000, p 79)

These various prohibitions in each of Judaism, Christianity or Islam depend on various combinations of scripture, faith and culture (which are not, of course, necessarily the same thing).¹⁵ Certainly, such prohibitions are by no means uniformly observed. But the very fact that images are contested so vigorously within and among each of these religions serves as testament to their importance and, possibly, their power. Otherwise, there would be no need to prohibit them.

step in our historical progress from Byzantium now to Rome.

Rome, Relics and the Preservation of the Saints

Where the Eastern church had preserved the memory of the saints in paint, the Western (and especially Roman) arm preserved pieces of the saints themselves. Relics are primarily the mortal remains (in whole or, more typically, in part) of a saint or other holy person. But a relic can also be an object closely or even tangentially connected with them. In all three cases, though, it is important to remember that the relic is an object –the thing itself--and not simply a representation, like an icon or a *kouros*.

The collection and reverence of relics goes back to the early Christian period, but it grew particularly in the fourth and fifth centuries, reaching its peak in the Roman, medieval church, when graves were opened and their contents dispersed and displayed in ornate reliquaries and churches throughout Europe (figure 3).

Again, there were those who were concerned about the dangerous line between the veneration and the worship of holy relics, but defences came from the likes of Saint Jerome, who pointed out that relics helped perform miracles, and who could argue with benefits such as that?

We can still see relics preserved in European churches today. For example, the Duomo at Siena boasts what is said to be the arm that John the Baptist used to baptize Saint Catherine of Siena. St Catherine died and was buried in Rome in 1380, but three years later the head alone was detached and dispatched to her native city, where it rests in the Basilica di San Domenico.

The Roman Catholic Church remains today the major religious organisation most actively concerned with holy relics. Indeed, it continues to organise these relics into three recognised classes. Mortal remains such as body parts are 'first class' relics. The second class comprises those relics deemed holy because they were used or worn by the person in question. These can still be greatly revered, such as the Holy Girdle of the Virgin Mary, which is preserved in Prato, Italy. The girdle it is said, was given to St Thomas after the Assumption, and in the 13th century it made its way to the city, where it has remained ever since. It is indicative of its importance that artists including Donatello were enlisted to create a special Pulpit of the Sacred Girdle on an exterior corner of the Prato Duomo. Here, five times a year, the Holy Girdle of Prato is still ceremonially displayed to the public. The reverence of relics, therefore, is not limited to the medieval past.

Perhaps one of the most famous (and controversial) secondary relic of all remains the Turin Shroud, the cloth that was for centuries revered as the burial garment of Jesus Christ himself. The shroud, which emerged in the 14th century and is housed in the Cathedral of San Giovanni Battista, shows what appears to be the imprint of a man bearing the stigmata of the crucifixion. It also bears a head that shows remarkable similarities to conventional western representations of the face of Christ.

Shroud. It is, rather, that this relic is not Christ's body itself but something that has become holy through supposed and intimate contact with it. To the modern observer, the imprint has a seemingly *photographic* quality.¹⁶

The metaphor of photography brings us to the third and final classification: the third class or 'representative' relic. Although this is the most junior ranking as far as the official classification goes, for our purposes this is actually the most important. This category of relic, which is additionally known as a 'substitute' relic, is not an original body part or even an item of clothing. Rather, it is something which has since been brought into direct contact with second, first class or 'real' relic. In this way, a modern piece of cloth (for example) could be touched against an 'original' relic and thus become a representative relic in its own right. The concept arose with the brandea of the fourth and fifth centuries, and the idea continues today with sorts of relics the public can buy at places such as Lourdes –or even over the Internet. Although these kinds of relics accordingly lack the prestige of the first and second classifications, they have a particular resonance for us, because under this system – and just as with a photographic negative-any number of representative relics can be made from the one holy original and thus become holy themselves. So: The representative relic is not the original 'object itself': indeed it can be separated from it by both time and space. Yet it does at the same time assume and (echoing Bazin) retain something of the essence of the prototype with which it has an irrefutable physical and ontological connection.

The Ontology of the Celebrity Photograph

The ontology of the holy relic thus brings us directly to the ontology of the photographic image. In the 1970s, John Berger famously dismissed the ‘original’ work of art (and especially painting) as a ‘holy relic.’ (1972, p. 30) Berger, however, was speaking in the popular, derogatory sense: For him, the original painting as a ‘holy relic’ was something that was falsely revered for its ‘bogus religiosity’. (1972, p. 23). Berger’s argument drew significantly from Walter Benjamin who in ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ contended that in reproduction the ‘original’ or ‘authentic’ work of art lost its ‘aura’. (Benjamin 1969, p. 221 ff) This may well be true of painting, but photography lends itself to a more complex analysis. Benjamin was not primarily concerned with photography as an art form; indeed, he considered such discussion ‘futile’ (1969, p. 227). His discussion of photography centred on its capacity as a means of mechanical reproduction. He subsequently dismissed the photograph itself as intrinsically inauthentic, stating: ‘From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the “authentic” print makes no sense.’ (1969, p. 224) But Benjamin was mistaken, just as he would have been in describing a fine art etching or engraving as ‘inauthentic’ for the same reason. But more than that, Benjamin failed to delve deeply enough into the ontology of the photographic image. For, while a painting or an engraving might be a work of total imagination or invention, the photograph is umbilically linked (no matter how distantly) to its subject matter; a subject matter which existed in time and space and upon whose physical existence at the moment of inception the photograph is inevitably dependent.¹⁷ For that reason, it is argued here that the photograph’s analogous relationship to the third class, holy relic in its religious sense is a source of its power, and not weakness.

It is worth reminding ourselves here of the essential simplicity of the traditional photographic process: that steady progression from the subject through the lens and into the camera; onto the negative and then, through the enlarger, onto the final print. Thus, any number of subsequent images can be made from one ‘original’ –an original which (vitally) at the point of exposure had a physical relationship with the thing photographed. This physical process explains photography’s privileged relationship with reality. It is a relationship that sculpture and painting – no matter how superficially ‘realistic’—can only envy. The photograph is not just a product of the photographer’s imagination.¹⁸ Certainly, there is imagination involved, but at the same time the photograph inevitably and actually *is* its subject –captured and preserved at one instant of time.

According to André Bazin, the photograph of today is analogous to mummification in ancient Egypt. In that culture, mummification was a form of death defiance: ‘the preservation of life by a representation of life.’ (1967, pp. 9-10) Nowadays, he continues, ‘...the (photographic) image helps us to remember the subject and to preserve him from a second spiritual death.’ (1967, p. 10) So (to echo Bazin) the celebrity, though dead, may still ‘live’ via the photographic image. Additionally, Bazin understood the importance of the underlying photographic process in preserving that special relationship between the image and reality. In other artistic media, he argued, the image was entirely man-made. In photography however, the: ‘image of the world is formed automatically.’ (1967, p. 13) He was not, of course, the first person to have noticed this: In 1839 William Henry Fox Talbot was able to describe his home at Lacock Abbey as the first building ‘that was ever yet known to originally called the process: ‘photogenic drawing’ and titled his seminal work on photography: *The Pencil of Nature* (Talbot 1844).

Bazin and Fox Talbot somewhat overstated the case by saying that photography was simply an automatic (or autographic) process. Clearly, the photographer does author or manipulate even the simplest of images to some extent (Nickel 2009). This may be considered especially true in the age of digital manipulation of photographs, thanks to the wide use of computer software such as Photoshop. It would be a mistake, however, to believe that digital techniques have exploded the ontology of the photographic image. Manipulation –by whatever means–is as old as the medium itself. In 1839, for example, Johann Enslin produced a photograph of Christ's head on an oak leaf.²⁰ Of course, most photographic manipulation (digital or otherwise) is not trickery aimed at deception. Even simple adjustments such as cropping, enlarging, and adjustments of brightness and contrast have long been part of the photographer's stock-in-trade whether accomplished in the dark room or on the computer. What has changed with digital techniques, therefore, is the ease but not the possibility of manipulation. Knowledge of this should provide an important *caveat* to the viewer, but be it analogue or digital, photography still does depend on a real, continuous link between the subject and the image. As Bazin put it: 'we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually *re-presented*, set before us, that is to say in time and space.' Photography was therefore all about: 'the transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction.' (1967, pp. 13-14) So, when we look at a photograph of something, we are, to a vital extent, also looking at 'the object itself.' (Bazin p. 14) As David Morgan argues in *The Sacred Gaze*, the celebrity photograph (2005, p. 81) Rojek goes so far as to label this: 'the St Thomas effect' in which: 'The imaginary relation of intimacy with the celebrity translates into the overwhelming need to touch the celebrity, or possess celebrity heirlooms or other discarded items.' (2001, p. 62) The photograph provides just such authentication. It is not a sculpture, like a *kouros*, and it not a painting, like an icon. Both could be works of fanciful or even total imagination. The photograph remains 'the object itself', like a holy relic.

For all our focus on ontology, we must not neglect the aesthetics of the celebrity photograph.

Aesthetically, of course, there is much more to a photograph than simply what or who it is 'of'; it is about form as well as content. The argument for photography as an art form (and not merely a reprographic medium) has long been made elsewhere, and there is no need to repeat it here.

However, it would be foolish to deny that for all its aesthetic accomplishments, Bazin was right:

The subject matter (the 'prototype') inevitably and ontologically remains a crucial part of the photograph and its claims upon our attention. This is especially the case with celebrity photography.

Not all photographs of famous people are valued because they are aesthetically 'good' photographs. They are valued –significantly-because of whom they portray. That goes a long way to explaining the success of the 'World's Most Photographed' exhibition and accompanying TV series. How many people would have come to the National Portrait Gallery and watched those BBC programmes had the photographs been of equal artistic merit but of people of whom they had never heard? A pertinent example is provided by Ted Leyson's 'stalker' photographs of Greta Garbo from contended, are valued primarily not for their artistic quality or technical merit.²¹ Rather, they are valued because they serve as relics of the last days of a reclusive former screen idol who famously did not want to be photographed. Their rarity adds to their relic value –they are pieces of Garbo: relics so precious that she herself did

not want us to see them.

At face value, the work of American photographer Annie Leibovitz may seem to be the antithesis of paparazzi such as Leyson. Leibowitz graduated from photographing musicians for *Rolling Stone* magazine to commissioned images of film stars and even royalty including, famously, the Queen in 2007. Indeed, Leibovitz has become something of a celebrity herself. Where photographs such as Leyson's of Garbo are part of the canon of what Holmes and Redmond (Holmes and Redmond, 2010, p. 2) describe as the 'oft-repeated caught off guard close-ups of the troubled, dishevelled, or misbehaving celebrity' usually taken against their wishes, Leibowitz's are lavishly staged with active collaboration of the subject who wishes them to be widely seen and admired. There is no doubting the aesthetic value and certainly the technical competence displayed in her work, which has become expensive, collectible and exhibited.²³ However, whatever the aesthetic and technical merits of such photography, at root it remains connected to apparently contrary candid or paparazzi images. Above all, both types of celebrity photography are primarily dependent on the 'presence' of their recognisable subject matter. Leibowitz's photographs, for all their polish, would lose the major part of their impact if they were not of recognisably famous people. This is because the celebrity photograph for all its aesthetic qualities (or lack of them) is unable and indeed unwilling to transcend who it is 'of'. Its ultimate strength as a holy relic.

The connections made so far have been avowedly historical and ontological. It is time now finally to move from the implicit to the explicit. Some photographers have already made the connection between religion and celebrity almost painfully obvious: Compare, for example, the traditional iconography of St Sebastian's martyrdom at the tree with Carl Fischer's 1968 photograph 'The Passion of Muhammad Ali', which became a cover-shot for *Esquire* magazine in April that year (figure 4).²⁴ Here, Ali stands, *contrapposto*, in his fighter's shorts and boots, his body pierced by six arrows in conscious reference to the traditional iconography of St Sebastian.²⁵ The previous year, Ali had clung to his beliefs and refused to be drafted into the United States Army. He was subsequently stripped of his world title.

We can take a more sustained example with the case of Elvis Presley: Beautiful, talented, flawed and dead before his time. His photographic image preserves him, as Bazin would put it, against death. Even unflattering images of him made shortly before he died remain powerful both to his fans and more critical observers. If Elvis is a hero-saint, then his remains need to be preserved and his grave the focus of veneration and cult practice, and this is exactly the case at his former Memphis home at Graceland, where his mortal form is buried in the garden and his grave is venerated daily by tourist and fans (figure five). 'In celebrity culture,' writes Rojek, 'fans build their own reliquaries of celebrity culture.' Indeed: '...celebrity homes are often things Elvis wore should become relics, such as his gold lamé suit, posthumously photographed in 1991 by Albert Watson. Watson photographed it on a simple wooden hanger, but today it is preserved in its own security glass case (reliquary) in the Graceland Museum. The suit, too, has become an object of devotion (figure six).

Elvis intuitively knew about relic creation. A regular feature of his concerts, especially from the 1970s, was the ritual throwing of scarves he had worn into the adoring crowd. Such was the increasing demand for these ‘brandea’ that he would have dozens of them lined up to be worn (if ever so briefly) before being tossed into the waiting audience. His friend and band member Charlie Hodge even used to get concert credit for his designated role in the routine. Such prodigious relic production clearly required on-stage assistance: In 1976 a reporter for the *Cincinnati Inquirer* counted no less than 38 scarves thus distributed into ‘the outstretched hands of his loyal followers.’ (Radel, 1976) In this way, Elvis actively contributed to the creation of objects of devotion which would outlive his mortal –but not his celebrity–existence.

We continue to make saints of our celebrities today. The late Diana, Princess of Wales (a notable omission from the NPG exhibition) is someone who was photographed so widely and effectively that Camille Paglia was able to describe her as ‘the last of the silent stars.’ (1995, p. 168) Her ‘saintliness’ was cultivated in her flawed and beautiful life; her youth preserved and her canonization seemingly guaranteed by her premature, dramatic and violent death. Judith Woolf in “‘Not the Girl But the Legend’: mythology, photography and the posthumous cult of Diana’ notes that after photographs among the flowers. ‘Her multiple image... became a series of icons through which her worshippers could purge the guilt of their own narrative greed.’ (2006)²⁶ Today we can visit a shrine in Diana’s honour –remarkably–at Harrods department store in London, complete with a photograph and another preserved relic: the glass from which she is said to have drunk at her ‘last supper’ in the Paris Ritz hotel on the 30th /31st August 1997. The Harrods shrine remains a site of reverence for both the curious and the genuinely devoted (figure 7).

The connection between celebrity and religion is further supported by Rojek. For him, an increasingly secular society sees the space vacated by organised religion replaced by celebrity: ‘as the belief in God waned, celebrities became immortal.’ (2001, p. 14) They are worshipped through cult (Rojek 2001, p. 53). He explains: ‘To the extent that organized religion has declined in the West, celebrity culture has emerged as one of the replacement strategies that promote new orders of meaning and solidarity.’ (2001, p. 99) Of course, as Rojek agrees, celebrity culture has not simply replaced religion: ‘the convergence is not total.’ (2001, p. 98) What we have, rather, is a process of evolution and osmosis. The celebrity is not wholly a religious icon, just as the photograph is not wholly the celebrity, but there is something of each in each other. The photograph connects them all.²⁷

The celebrities of today have a long, evolving provenance in Western culture, as do their representations. In ancient Greece we saw the hero, originally mortal, now semi endowed with immortality and perpetual youth. He is larger than life, frequently flawed and often at odds with the gods. In order to live forever, he first must die, typically early and frequently violently. He is preserved in the *kouros*, which is more than just his image: it is partly him.

The Byzantine icon is similarly an object of veneration in which the saint him or herself is somehow present. Its magical properties were thought so powerful that it was both venerated and proscribed, articulating the power of the image and again blurring the boundaries between presence and representation.

The medieval relic, too, had a physical connection with the person involved. This could be both painfully direct, or by varying degrees of distance. At its extreme, this connection was both by reproduction and association, but like the photograph, the ontological connection remained. The photograph elegantly combines both the representation and the artefact because it is both an image and a relic at the same time.

We can conclude, then, that the study of the celebrity photograph is a valuable aid to an understanding of celebrity itself. This understanding of the nature of celebrity in turn reveals something of ourselves: how unexpectedly similar we are to our cultural predecessors; how the world's most photographed people are the classical heroes and religious saints of the present day; and how the photograph connects it all as holy relic.

Email: richard.howells@kcl.ac.uk

List of Illustrations

Figure 1 Marble Kouros, Greek, c.520 BC © Trustees of The British Museum

Figure 2 Icon of St George, Russian Byzantine, late 14th century AD © Trustees of The British Museum **Figure 3** Holy Thorn Reliquary of Jean, duc de Berry, Paris, c.1400-10 AD ©

Trustees of The British Museum **Figure 4** Carl Fischer, ‘The Passion of Muhammad Ali’ 1968 ©

Carl Fischer **Figure 5** Grave of Elvis Presley, Memphis TN © Richard Howells **Figure 6** Elvis Presley’s Gold Lamé Suit, Graceland Museum, Memphis TN ©

Richard Howells **Figure 7** Memorial to Diana, Princess of Wales and Dodi Fayed, Harrods department store, London © Richard Howells

Notes on contributor

Richard Howells is Reader in Culture, Media and Creative Industries at King’s College London. His publications include *The Myth of the Titanic* (Palgrave, 1999), *Visual Culture* (Polity, 2003 and 2011) and, with Robert Matson, *Using Visual Evidence* (Open University Press, 2009). He is a contributor to *The Encyclopedia of Twentieth Century Photography* (Routledge, 2006) and his journal articles include “‘Is it Because I is Black?’ Race, Humour and the Polysemiology of Ali G” in the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* and ‘Self Portrait: The Sense of Self in British Documentary Photography’ in *National Identities*. His policy essay ‘Sorting the Sheep from the Sheep: Value, Worth and the Creative Industries’ is included in *The Public Value of the Humanities*, edited by Jonathan Bate, Bloomsbury Academic,

Council.

References

- The Holy Bible* (King James version). *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2003, Washington, DC.
- Armstrong, C. 1998. *Scenes in a Library*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press.
- Barthes, R. 1999. *Mythologies*, London, Vintage Books.
- Bazin, A. 1967. The Ontology of the Photographic Image. *What is Cinema?* Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Benjamin, W. 1969. The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.
- Illuminations*, New York, Schocken Books.
- Berger, J. 1972. *Ways of Seeing*, London, BBC and Penguin Books.
- Besançon, A. 2000. *The Forbidden Image*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Cashmore, E. 2004. *Beckham*, second edition, Cambridge, Polity.
- Crone, P. 1980. Islam, Judeo-Christianity and Byzantine iconoclasm. *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 2, 59-96.
- Dyer, R. 1979. *Stars*, London, British Film Institute.
- Dyer, R. 2003. *Heavenly Bodies*, London, Routledge.
- Dyer, R. & McDonald, P. 2008. *Stars*, London, British Film Institute.
- Holmes, S. & Redmond, S. (eds.) 2006. *Framing Celebrity: New Directions in Celebrity Culture*, London: Routledge.
- Holmes, S. & Redmond, S. 2010. A Journal in Celebrity Studies. *Celebrity Studies*, 1: 1, pp. 1-10
- Hostetler, J. A. 1993. *Amish Society*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Howells, R. 2003. *Visual Culture*, Cambridge and Malden, MA, Polity.
- Inglis, F. 2010. *A Short History of Celebrity*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- Maguire, H. 1996. *The Icons of Their Bodies*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press.
- Morgan, D. 1998. *Visual Piety*, Berkeley, California, University of California Press.
- Morgan, D. 2005. *The Sacred Gaze*, Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Muir, R. (ed.) 2005. *The World's Most Photographed*, London: National Portrait Gallery Publications.
- Nagy, G. 1999. *The Best of the Achaeans*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Nickel, D. R. 2009. 'Impressed by Nature's Hand': Photography and Authorship In: Howells, R. and Matson, R.W. (ed.) *Using Visual Evidence*. Maidenhead and New York: Open University Press and McGraw Hill Education.
- Paglia, C. 1995. Diana Regina. *Vamps and Tramps*. London: Viking.
- Pugh, P. D. G. 1970. *Staffordshire Portrait Figures and Allied Subjects of the Victorian Era*, London, Barrie and Jenkins.
- Radel, C. 1976. Fans 'All Shook Up' No Doubt About It: Elvis is Still King. *The Cincinnati Inquirer*, March 21.
- Rojek, C. 2001. *Celebrity*, London, Reaktion Books.
- Spivey, N. 1996. *Understanding Greek Sculpture*, London, Thames and Hudson.
- Talbot, W. H. F. 1844. *The Pencil of Nature*, London, Longman & Co.
- Woolf, J. 2006. Not the Girl But the Legend: Mythology, Photography and the Posthumous Cult of Diana. *Life Writing*, 3, 103-123.

¹ Earlier versions of this article were given as guest research seminar papers to The Courtauld Institute of Art and The Department of the History of Art, Oxford University. I am grateful to the members of both seminars for their helpful comments, which I duly acknowledge with thanks. ² See, for example, the extensive Pugh Collection at the Potteries Museum and Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent. A definitive reference remains: Pugh, P. D. G. 1970. *Staffordshire Portrait Figures and Allied Subjects of the Victorian Era*, London, Barrie and Jenkins. ³ This is a point well made, for example in the work of Su Holmes and reiterated in her keynote address: 'Celebrities crying in close-up - surely this is not the future of television?: Celebrity studies, and the changing face of fame' at the New Developments in Stardom conference at King's College, London, 22 March 2008. See also Holmes, S. & Redmond, S. (eds.) 2006. *Framing Celebrity: New Directions in Celebrity Culture*, London: Routledge. ⁴ For an overview of some of the seminal works in celebrity studies, together with a rationale for the serious study of celebrity within academe, see Su Holmes and Sean Redmond, 'A Journal in Celebrity Studies', *Celebrity Studies*, 1: 1, pp. 1-10 ⁵ 'The World's Most Photographed', National Portrait Gallery, London, 6 July to 23 October 2005. The TV series was transmitted weekly from 6 July to 14 September, 2005. Muir, R. (ed.) 2005a. *The World's Most Photographed*, London: National Portrait Gallery Publications. ⁶ Ibid. Nagy in turn cites R.K. Hack, 'Homer's Transformation of History' in *Classical Journal* 35: 471-481 (1940), 481.

⁷ Jim (James) Morrison (1943-1971) was lead singer of the Doors until his death at the age of 27. Rojek (p. 14) lists Morrison as one of those who have become 'idols of cult worship' and later (p. 53) extends the definition to mass media celebrities more broadly. ⁸ Ali at that time was still known as Cassius Clay. The pictures were in fact part of a public relations fabrication: Ali at that time could not actually swim. ⁹ Spivey, N. 1996. *Understanding Greek Sculpture*, London, Thames and Hudson. ¹⁰ For more on the presence of the religious image, see Morgan, D. 2005. *The Sacred Gaze*, Berkeley, University of California Press. ¹¹ 2003. *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Washington, DC. ¹² Iconographically, saints are recognizable by their 'attributes' such as, in the case of Saint George, his cross and especially his dragon. ¹³ The emphasis is Maguire's. ¹⁴ See also Crone, P. 1980. Islam, Judeo-Christianity and Byzantine iconoclasm. *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 2, 59-96. ¹⁵ See also Crone, P. 1980. Islam, Judeo-Christianity and Byzantine iconoclasm. *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 2, 59-96. ¹⁶ In a footnote, Bazin makes a similar observation –but it is only a footnote and is worthy of further discussion. The authenticity (or not) of the shroud, of course, adds to the complexity of the issue. See Bazin, A. 1967. *The Ontology of the Photographic Image. What is Cinema?* Berkeley: University of California Press. ¹⁷ I have argued elsewhere that the ontology of the photographic image is not revolutionised by digital techniques. See Richard Howells, *Visual Culture*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), especially chapter eight. ¹⁸ For the importance of authorship in photography, see, for example, Douglas R Nickel, "'Impressed by Nature's Hand": Photography and Authorship' in Richard Howells and Robert W Matson (eds), *Using Visual Evidence* (Maidenhead and New York: Open University Press, 2009), pp. 55-77. ¹⁹ William Henry Fox Talbot, 'The Art of Photogenic Drawing', read to the Royal Society, January 1839, cited in Armstrong, C. 1998. *Scenes in a Library*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press. ²⁰ For a fuller expansion of this argument, see Howells, R. 2003. *Visual Culture*, Cambridge and Malden, MA, Polity, chapter 11. ²¹ David Morgan, writing on popular religious images in *Visual Piety*, makes a similar argument. These images are not contemplated for their aesthetic merit, and the book as a whole commendably tries to

move beyond the 'aestheticist dismissal' of religious imagery. See Morgan, D. 1998. *Visual Piety*, Berkeley, California, University of California Press.²² See especially Leyson's photograph 'Garbo Confronts Her Stalker' of 1990, reproduced in Muir (ed.), pp. 86-87.²³ For example: Annie Leibovitz, 'A Photographer's Life', National Portrait Gallery, London, 18 October 2008 to 1 February 2009; Annie Leibovitz, 'Master Set' (selling exhibition), Phillips de Pury and Co., London, 23 October 2008 to 17 November, 2008.²⁴ I am grateful to Carl Fischer for his personal permission to reproduce this photograph in this article.²⁵ Muir (ed.) specifically compares Fischer's photograph with Andrea del Castagno's 'The Martyrdom of St Sebastian' but the iconology is common to most traditional representations of the saint.²⁶ Woolf also notes that the camera provided what was possibly the final, fatal, intrusion into her privacy.²⁷ The extent to which the classical/byzantine/medieval provenance applies to that modern breed of celebrities lamented to be famous simply for being famous -Rojek (p. 20ff) calls them 'celetoids-is ripe for further research but lies beyond the scope of this paper.